

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medals

October 20, 2011

The President. Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the White House. This is one of my favorite events. We are here to recognize the winners of the Citizens Medal, one of the highest honors a civilian can receive. This is the second year the nominations process has been open to the public, and I notice that once again the women outnumber the men. *[Laughter]* I'm beginning to see a pattern here.

You know, on Sunday, I helped dedicate the National Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial. And this afternoon, as I'm spending time with these extraordinary people, I'm reminded of the fact that during the last speech that Dr. King ever gave, he retold the story of the Good Samaritan. And most of you know the story. We know it begins with a man lying injured on a road. And Dr. King said that the first people who saw him asked themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" So they made excuses for not stopping. They said the man was faking his injury, or it wasn't their problem. But according to Dr. King, the Good Samaritan reversed the question. "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

The 13 Americans that we honor today have all faced in their own ways the moment that Dr. King described, that Good Samaritan moment when you see a neighbor in need and you have to ask yourself the question. They come from different backgrounds, and they've devoted their lives to different causes, but they are united by the choice that they've made. They could have made excuses to doing nothing. Instead, they chose to help.

For many of them, a lifelong mission began with a small act of kindness. In 1987, a single mom and her child—her children moved in across the street from Ida Martin. Ida saw their refrigerator was empty except for a bottle of water, so she brought them groceries. And I guess once she got started, she couldn't stop. *[Laughter]* So last year, the organization she founded answered nearly 22,000 requests for aid.

Then there's Milly Bloomquist from Penn Yan, New York. And for decades, she has personified the phrase "above and beyond." At her 90th birthday party, one speaker said that Penn Yan has its own special system for handling emergencies: "If you're out of food, call Milly. If your heat has gone out, call Milly. If you can't pay your electricity bill, call Milly. If you need a winter coat, call Milly."

The right choice is rarely the easy one. And for some of those we honor here today, the choice to help was especially hard because it came in the wake of tragedy. Steve and Liz Alderman lost their son Peter on 9/11. Roger Kemp's daughter Ali was murdered nearly a decade ago. Janice Langbehn was denied the right to visit her partner Lisa as she lay dying in the hospital.

As a father and husband, I can't begin to imagine the grief that they must have felt in that moment, their anger and their sense that the world was not fair. But they refused to let that anger define them. They each became, in Janice's words, an "accidental activist." And thanks to their work, there are parents and partners who will never have to go through what they went through.

Now, I'm happy to say that there was a pretty stiff competition for these medals. Citizens from all walks of life submitted nearly 6,000 nominations online, and it took us 4 months to

select the winners. In the end, these 13 individuals were chosen not just for the work they do, but for the example that they set.

Over the past year, we've been reminded time and time again that our lives can be altered by events beyond our control. A tornado or a hurricane can devastate a community. An earthquake halfway around the world can threaten businesses here at home. An economic crisis that begins in one corner of the housing market can spread to leave millions of Americans out of work.

So we don't always get to choose the challenges that we face. But how we respond is entirely up to us. We are each on that Good Samaritan road, the road that Dr. King spoke of more than 40 years ago. We can see that there are people who need our help. And while we come from different backgrounds, we all face the same, simple question: Will we help them, or will we not?

In some ways, in these difficult times, it's easier than ever to walk on by. We can tell ourselves, "I've got enough problems of my own." "I can't make a big enough difference." "If my neighbors are less fortunate, maybe it's their fault." But as Americans, that's not who we are. Because while, yes, we are a nation of individuals, we're also a community; I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper. That's a creed we all share.

So this afternoon, I am proud to share the stage with these extraordinary citizens. I also know that for our Government to truly honor them, we have to do more than hand out medals. We have to follow their example. And that won't always be easy. As individuals, as communities, and as a country, we all face the temptation to find excuses not to help. In these decisive moments, then, we need to choose between doing something and doing nothing. And I hope we will remember the stories of these extraordinary men and women as we make that choice. I hope they inspire us to put ourselves in another person's shoes. And I hope that years from now, when they retell the story of our time, they will say that we too lent a hand to our neighbor in need.

I should just point out that a few people—like Molly—when I said we could not be prouder of what they've accomplished, bristled a little bit and said, "I'm not done yet." [Laughter] So these guys are still out there making a difference. And they'll be right there with us if we end up doing the right thing. All right?

So congratulations to all of the winners of the Citizens Medal. I've got some outstanding military aides here, and one of them is going to read the citations, one at a time, and then I'll present a medal to each of the honorees.

[At this point, the military aide to the President read the citations, and the President presented the medals.]

The President. What a remarkable group of Americans.

I want to thank all of you for joining us here today, all the friends and family who are here to celebrate our Citizens Medals winners, because I think that, not to speak for them, but I suspect they'd say that they couldn't have done what they did without the incredible support of all the people who are here. The colleagues and the loved ones who submitted nominations online, I'm sure they're appreciative, and obviously, you made a pretty convincing case.

I think our honorees recognize that our work is not yet done. And so I just want to repeat, I hope that their incredible work ends up setting an example for all of us, both in public service and in our daily lives.

And I know that some folks today who are here also represent the Corporation for National and Community Service. Every day, you help Americans make their country a better place, and I want to thank all of you for your hard work.

So with that, we've got, my understanding is, some pretty good food here—[*laughter*]—maybe even a little music, as we celebrate these extraordinary individuals. Please give them one more big round of applause.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. Participating in the ceremony were medal recipients Stephen and Elizabeth Alderman, Clarence L. Alexander, Camilla "Milly" Bloomquist, Judith T. Broder, John Keaveney, Roger Kemp, Janice Langbehn, Ida Martin, Margaret Martin, Michelle McIntyre-Brewer, and Roberto P. Perez; and Sujata and Nirmala Emani, daughters of medal recipient Vijaya Emani.

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